12 The Demise of Old Norse Religion: A Synthesis

In the opening of this book, it was noticed that Christianity replaced the Old Norse religion on an official level in Scandinavia during the second half of the Viking Age. When describing this transition in recent research, the term "Christianization" is often applied. This historiography mostly discusses the outcome of the encounter, that is, the early Medieval Christianity and the new Christian society. The intentions of the present study have been to put focus on the Old Norse religion during this period of change and to analyze the processes behind its extinction. There is a lack of knowledge in religious studies with regard to investigating *how* and *why* religious traditions disappear in general. The present study has intended to give a systematic presentation from the study of Old Norse religion with a specific focus on the role of native rulers when dismantling the old religion and society, as well as the pagan chieftains' defense of this old order. Focus has thus been placed on the actions performed by these agents and their intentions.

12.1 A protracted process that took place at different times in different places

There is a given synthesis among all the results of the present study, namely the recurring pattern from the first Christian kings' efforts to dismantle the Norse religion—via the resistance of the pagans and its collapse—to the establishment of Christian kingdoms in Scandinavia. In the countries with powerful kings this process took place at different times in different places. In Denmark the process started with Haraldr Klakk's baptism in 826 and it ended up at Haraldr Gormsson's conversion around the 960s, that is, a time span of 140 years. King Haraldr Klakk and his brothers conquered parts of Jylland *c.* 810 after the killing of King Godfred (Old Danish *Guthfrith*). However, he was attacked on several occasions by the sons of King Godfred. It has been argued that Haraldr had been in contact with Christianity before his baptism in 826.[1] Haraldr sought support from Emperor Louis the Pious to strengthen his position in Denmark as early as 814. He publicly paid tribute to the pious emperor, which made him less credible among the pagan groups at home. In 819, he recognized southern Jylland as his sphere of power in a settlement with the sons of Godfred. But already in 823 and later in 826, he felt threatened by them and their allies. Thus, Haraldr finally decided to accept baptism in order to gain protection from the Frankish Empire. He had

1 On Haraldr's contacts with Christianity, see Hallencreutz 1986b: 84.

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probably also been touched by Archbishop Ebo's Danish mission around 823. Haraldr's unpopularity with the Danish elite in Jylland is likely connected with his religio-political position and his attempts at missions among the pagan Danes.

Rimbert reports in *Vita Anskarii* chapter seven that King Haraldr was assailed by hatred and malignity from his kingdom by other kings of the same province and he was even driven out from Denmark by them. Thus, he went to Emperor Louis the Pious and asked for help so that he might be able to regain his kingdom. The emperor then urged him to accept the Christian faith, since there would then be a more intimate friendship between them. King Haraldr then accepted his conversion, and when he was sprinkled with the holy water of baptism the emperor himself received him from the sacred font as a godfather and adopted him as his son. According to *Vita Hludovici* chapter 33, the emperor also gave him the county of Rüstringen in East Frisia after his baptism at St Alban's Church in Mainz. Rimbert continues in *Vita Anskarii* chapter seven, that when the emperor desired to send Haraldr back to his country so that he could recover his dominions, Louis made an enquiry in order to find a holy and devoted man who could go on and strengthen the king's Christian faith and also convert his people. The monks Ansgar and Autbert were chosen for this mission. They sailed with the king on a ship via Dorestadt and the territory of the Frisian to the Danish border. Rimbert mentions that the king could not for the time being obtain peaceful possession of his kingdom, and therefore had a place beyond the River Elbe so that he could halt if it was necessary. Rimbert continues in *Vita Anskarii* chapter eight, that Ansgar and Autbert eventually started their mission among pagans and initially they were quite successful. Despite the Frankish support, Haraldr's reign in the southern areas of Jylland was short and it ended in 827. He never recovered his kingdom in Denmark and Ansgar's and Autbert's mission interrupted, since the latter got sick and died.[2] In the early 830s Ansgar returned to the Frankish Empire. Paganism was at that time still strong in Denmark. The Christian mission did not make any progress until the second half of the 840s when Godfred's son, Hárekr (Old Danish *Harek*) I, gained power over the country. He conducted a cautious policy towards the Frankish Empire. In 845, however, a large Danish fleet with pagan warriors attacked Hamburg with Ansgar's church and monastery. Most likely, it was the same army of Vikings that had previously attacked Paris. These severe attacks on Hamburg and Paris led to a crisis in the relationship between the Danish king and the empire. King Hárekr had to act and ordered the fleet's leader, Ragnarr (Latin *Reginherus*),[3] to be executed. He also al-

2 VA 8 and Gelting 2020: 1583.

3 He is perhaps identical to Ragnarr loðbrók in the Old Norse traditions.

lowed Ansgar to build a church in Hedeby.[4] His successor King Hárekr II was persuaded by his entourage to close this church and expel the priests. Ansgar managed to stop these actions and he also convinced the king to allow the erection of another church in Ribe. It was also permitted to use bells in connection to the mass.[5] Since sources lack for the period after Ansgar's activity, we do not know much about the religious-political development until 934. Widukind reports that the German ruler Henry attacked the pagan Danish king Knuba (Old Danish *Gnupa*), who had been raiding among the Frisians. King Knuba was then forced to pay tributes and to receive baptism.[6] In 948 three Danish bishops took part in a synod of Ingelheim arranged by Archbishop Adaldag of Bremen: Liopdag of Ribe, Ored of Schleswig, and Reginbert of Aarhus.[7] This indicates a nascent church organization in Denmark, however, the king of Denmark, Gormr, was still a pagan in the 950s. The baptism of his son Haraldr, under influence of Emperor Otto, finally lead to the official conversion *c.* 963 (for this event, see ch. 3 above).

The demise of the Old Norse religion in Norway and Sweden has already been treated extensively above, and does not need any further comments. In Norway the space of time was somewhat shorter than the development in Denmark. The dismantling process started there with King Hákon góði's first attempts to convert the Norwegians around the 930s and ended up at the assembly at Moster 1022 when St Óláfr and Grímkell founded the Christian law, that is a period of 90 years. During that period the resistance of pagans occurred mostly in Trøndelag, however, after 1022, it was seemingly broken. In Sweden the disintegration of the indigenous religion on a public level had a certain temporal delay and later shift compared to Denmark and Norway. It started quite early with King Óláfr Eiríksson's conversion in 995 but ended first with King Ingi's campaign against the pagans' customs. The last known heathen reaction against the church in Sweden was as late as Bishop Henrik of Sigtuna's expulsion in the 1130s. Hence, the demise process in Sweden continued for over 130 years.

The downfall of the old religion in Iceland, and probably also in Gotland,[8] seems to have been somewhat different compared to Denmark, Norway and Sweden. On these islands powerful rulers were lacking, that is, kings who claimed that they descended from the gods. The population was ruled by quite egalitarian chieftains, who were rather "friends" of the gods, instead of "descendants" of them. In the case of Iceland, there were also Christians on the island from the

4 VA ch. 24.

5 VA chs 31 and 32. See also Gelting 2020: 1584.

6 Widukind 1,40.

7 Gelting 2020: 1585.

8 See Andrén 2012.

initial colonization. The dismantling of the old religion there seems to have taken place in a relatively peaceful and smooth manner at the end of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh century. Only a few pagan reactions against the Christians can be documented in the sources. There, the decision about official Christianity was made in connection with a council meeting where the chieftains gathered and made a joint decision under the guidance of Lawman Þorgeirr. It is quite likely, however, that the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason played an important role when dismantling the old cult there.

In ecclesiastical organizational terms, the establishment of the church provinces with the archbishop's seats indicates an absolute end point for the dismantling process of the indigenous tradition as official religion in Scandinavia: Lund for Denmark, 1103/1104, Niðaróss for Norway and Iceland, 1152/1153 and Uppsala for Sweden, 1164. Hence, the disintegration of the Old Norse religion in the Scandinavian countries was a quite extended process.

12.2 The early Christian kings

The reasons and motives of the Scandinavian rulers for abandoning their traditional religion are complex. Christianity brought many types of benefits for rulers and chieftains, for example new trade relations, the development of social-political networks, and attachments to Christian elite groups in Continental Europe and the British Isles. If a Christian king there let his clergies baptize a pagan ruler or chieftain from Scandinavia, and offered himself to be godparent for him, this increased the social capital and status of the receiver, both at home and among Scandinavian diaspora groups outside the Nordic countries. In these milieus Christianity developed to an exclusive religion, which included a lot of prestige for the new Christian adherents. Hence, the social and political dimensions of conversion were very crucial in these elite groups. As Cecilia Ljung states: "Personal beliefs of individuals were probably not essential in this context."[9] It seems, moreover, as if people were baptized often on social and political grounds, while their Christian identity and beliefs were developed later. There was probably also a strong social need for individuals in the wider population to belong to the same religious group as their leaders. Many scholars have described conversion strikingly as a top-down-process.

The early Christian kings played a most active role when winding up the indigenous tradition that previously formed their lives. They concentrated their efforts on the cultic aspects of the indigenous religion that were more under their

9 Ljung 2019: 183. Cf. Gelting 2020.

control and at the same time crucial for the *modus operandi* of the Old Norse religion. The early Christian kings were pragmatists. Since they could not affect the traditional worldview and prevent people from telling the mythical narratives about the old gods they turned to such aims that they were able to achieve. It was easier to control what people did than what they thought. Initially, when their political power was no greater than that of the local chieftains, they adapted their strategies to what was in their power to do, such as abandoning their own traditional roles in sacrificial cult, and in that way disrupting the old liturgical order. This strategy was used by the Christian kings Anunder and Ingi in Sweden and by King Hákon góði in Norway. The latter king's approach was a failure, however. When the Christian rulers' political position became more powerful, they could also persuade, or even force the local chieftains, who organized the old cultic activities at the local pagan sanctuaries, to abandon their roles, as in the cases of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson in the end of the tenth and early eleventh century Trøndelag. In some cases, they also destroyed these local sanctuaries including the pagan idols and ritual objects. By means of such strategies they dismantled the indigenous religion on a local level, including the local cult communities. Finally, when the Christians kings together with the clergy of the Church had an even stronger position of power and support through an efficient administration, they prohibited animal sacrifices and other traditional customs by means of written laws, also in such contexts where the old customs continued as a so-called "crypto-religion" also after the more official conversion. These methods had consequences on both a private and a public level. At this point, Christian power could also more systematically affect the world of ideas, at least among educated groups and for those who could read. Scholars and representatives of the ruling elite used euhemerism, idol parody and demonology as literary strategies in chronicles and historical writings, in order to deprive the old gods their power and thus also as means for dismantling the indigenous religion. Such strategies were probably also used at oral performances from the very beginning of the Christian mission in Scandinavia. It is interesting that the mythical accounts about pagan deities were maintained as part of a collective memory and cultural heritage even when Christianity was established, although the divine nature of these gods was removed from them. The Christian kings and the missionaries also preached about the faith, for example they made explanations for the Christian death liturgy, as part of the educational work. The Christian ideas about death, such as the theme of light and paradise, may well have attracted some individuals and groups to abandon their old ideas about Valhǫll and Hel. Sometimes the early Christian kings also used gifts to get the pagan chieftains to give up the faith of their ancestors.

Due to the specific contexts, the native Christian kings sometimes used violent means, but usually nonviolent strategies or tactics were applied. King Óláfr

Tryggvason, for instance, used violence in Norway when dismantling the old religion, since he had the power to do that in such contexts. When removing the Old Norse religion in Iceland, the same king applied negotiations, since this island was so remote from Norway that a military operation was impossible to carry out. Hence, King Óláfr was a pragmatist when choosing methods and strategies for converting people in different regions and countries that were under his influence. Sources report that Óláfr also replaced the old pagan custom called *blót-drykkjur*, with new drinking ceremonies at Christian holidays, "as a favor to the people." The formula *ár ok friðr* was transferred from the old sacrificial feasts as well as the worship of Njǫrðr and Freyr, to Christian feasts and prayers addressed to God, Christ and St Mary. These Christian feasts replaced the old drinking rituals and in addition aimed to realize the same goals in their new Christian setting, that is, hopes for a good year, prosperity, good harvest as well as peace in the upcoming season. This type of cult continuation and replacements promoted the transition of religion in several senses.

When designing their missionary methods, the new Christian power and their clergy focused on the weak religious leadership in the Old Norse religion as well as the ritual system, which seems to have been very important for the persistence of the indigenous religion. As with other ethnic, folk or primary religions, the Old Norse religion was remembered through rituals as long as they were performed. When a traditional ritual ceased to be performed, it disappeared from memory within a few generations. The lack of canonical texts and a well-organized priestly institution that could protect the old religious traditions was a competative disadvantage in this context and most likely facilitated this process. By means of erasing the rituals and the cult organization, cult leaders, sanctuaries and ritual objects, the old religion was extinct from public life.

12.3 The pagans' resistance

It is quite clear that a pagan opposition appeared against the new Christian power in, for instance, Sweden, Norway and Iceland *c.* 950–1100 and somewhat earlier in Denmark. The resistances of pagans in Sweden and Norway resembled each other. In both countries these oppositions were related to groups of people appearing in geographic areas which also included important pagan sanctuaries with a regional or even over-regional significance. In Sweden the resistance groups were strong in the central and northern parts of the Lake Mälaren area (that is, Svetjud), where the famous sanctuary Uppsala was located, while the strongest resistance of the pagans in Norway appeared in Trøndelag, where significant cult places were situated, such as Lade and Mære. In connection with

these famous places of worship various elite groups appeared who probably felt marginalized by the new Christian kingship. These groups were eager to maintain pagan cult at these chief sanctuaries.

The pagan groups, which protected and maintained the traditional sacrificial cult in Uppsala, Lade and Mære actually defended the old society and life-style, where power was related to the local and regional assemblies, that is, the old order. The pagan kings were in both Svetjud and Trøndelag considered as a *primi inter pares* and their power was restricted by the assemblies. The Christian kings opposed this decentralized system and advocated a more centralized state including a relation with the papal church. The resistance among pagans was also related to their fear that the new religion could destroy the old cult community, and thereby also the unity of the traditional society. The old pagan feasts were crucial for the cohesion of the group and the relation to the divine powers. If the farmers abandoned the faith and religious practice of their ancestors, they feared that various activities related to social life could be disturbed, such as justice, ownership, warfare, subsistence, farming customs, and so forth. The Christian calendar implied fasting and resting on Sundays and holidays, for example. The heathen peasants also wanted the king to sacrifice on their behalf at the great yearly feasts for a good year and peace (*blóta til árs ok friðar*) in a traditional way. The pagan king was considered as a necessary ritual link and mediator between the worlds of humans and gods and he was perceived as the guarantor of good harvests from the fields. He was considered as the prime representative of the community at these religious feasts and thus only considered legitimate as long as he performed sacrifices on the chieftains and farmers behalf.

The reason why these similarities occur is connected to social structures in the Late Iron Age societies of both Sweden and Norway. None of them formed a political unit in the early Viking Age. Rather, they were ruled by many local rulers and lacked a central state. In these tribe societies, power was divided between many hands and local chieftains could be quite powerful and independent from other rulers. Only occasionally, these chieftains had High-Kings ruling over them in a kind of tribe federation. Such kings could be quite powerful and sometimes they claimed to be descendants of the gods. The deep roots of the social-political structures in Sweden and Norway, which included decentralized societies, provided fertile ground for regional contradictions regarding common decisions, such as the conversion. Some parts of these countries were in a process of developing more central state under Christian royal power, while other parts strived to maintain the traditional society and local independence, including the old religion and order.

The pagans' resistance against Christians in Iceland was not restricted to specific geographic areas or to an old over-regional sanctuary as in Norway and Sweden. Those who supported the pagan party had their farms in all areas of Iceland.

The pagans applied lampooning and mockery, as well as minor violence and legislation (*frœndaskǫmm*) as weapons against the Christians. The reason why these representatives of the pagan party in Iceland wanted to preserve the Old Norse religion is probably related to the fear that conversion would imply wider social-political changes, such as transformation in community life, feasting calendar, labor, ownership, cultivation customs and so on. Perhaps the pagan chieftains in Iceland also feared that power would be transferred from them to the Norwegian king with Christianity and that the local independence of the chieftains was menaced.

The early Christian kings in Scandinavia also used their faith as a political-religious ideology when Christian kingship was more settled, in order to establish and maintain the new social and political order, that is, *inn nýi siðr*. This ideology can be termed as the religion of status quo. It supported the privileged groups of society and was propagated by the clergies. The pagan chieftains who opposed these kings and the new Christian system and culture used their ancestral religion as an ideology in order to preserve the old society and order, that is, *inn forni siðr*. Previously, this religious ideology could be categorized as a religion of status quo, however, as the new Christian power increased, it was developed into a religion of resistance, with a few features of a religion of revolution. That ideology served as a driving force and motivation for these pagan actors to offer resistance.

The bishops, who were closely allied with the kings, became a new power factor in society, often at the expense of the local chieftains. The royal power and the church gradually became more and more powerful, which was probably perceived as a threat to the significance of the *þing* for political decisions. However, the assembly institution seems to have been important for public interests throughout the Middle Ages.

12.4 The establishment of Christian kingdoms

The reason why the pagans' resistance finally collapsed in the Scandinavian countries had multiple grounds. As has been stated by many scholars in the previous research, Christian religion and culture slowly seeped into and gradually influenced the societies that existed in Scandinavia for quite an extensive period. Conversion was thus in many places of Scandinavia and Iceland a long, gradual and slow process. It is argued, however, that certain decisive events caused the pagans' resistance to finally give way for Christianity in each country. In Iceland, King Óláfr Tryggvason played a crucial role for the official conversion, as he put pressure on some important Icelandic chieftains, not least by imprisoning their sons in Norway. It is also concluded, that certain social-political structures in Ice-

land were crucial for the extinction of the official pagan religion there. Power was concentrated to the General Assembly, where all chieftains' voices counted. When the conversion decision was taken at Alþingi 999/1000 it was accepted by most chieftains. Hence, the pagan resistance ceased quite rapidly among elite groups after the Lawspeaker Þorgeirr declared his famous words at the assembly. It was probably important for the Icelanders that this decision was made at the General Assembly, that is, a place where, according to tradition, important decisions had been made. Most likely this decision was the basic cause for a peaceful process in Iceland. King Óláfr had an impact on this decision by means of using Icelandic chieftains as Christian delegates at the assembly. The establishment of the Church organization, including the erection of churches, fixed sees, schools, literacy and the introduction of tithes, began to emerge first around 1100 and must be described as a slower and more gradual process.

The increasing military power of the Christian kings in Norway became absolutely decisive for the final collapse of paganism in Trøndelag. King Óláfr Tryggvason and King Óláfr Haraldsson had sufficient military means to stop the pagan resistance there between 995 and 1030. The early formation of state in Norway, in Norwegian called *rikssamlingen*, which began in the ninth century under King Haraldr, was more or less completed after these kings, that is, between 1030 and 1150. During that period, the church and the royal power created the Norwegian kingdom, with an ecclesiastical organization, a royal administration and laws.

It seems as if the royal power including a military apparatus played a decisive role in the final blow against the pagans' resistance in Sweden also. Most likely the pagan king Blótsveinn and the social fraction defending the old sanctuary of Uppsala were finally defeated by the army of King Ingi in the late eleventh century. The pagan revolts lasted much longer in Sweden than elsewhere in Scandinavia. The reason for this probably lies in the lack of consolidated power structures there. Royal power in Sweden was weak compared to Norway and Denmark. The Christian kingdom was more settled and recognized in Sweden around 1150. The interdependence between the king and Church was also more evident there at that time.